

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR MANAGING PURCHASE POINTS**BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION****1. Field of the Invention**

[0001] The present invention relates to a purchase point managing technique,
5 [and it] particularly [relates] to a method and apparatus for managing purchase
points [given] awarded at the time a user makes a purchase[s merchandise or
the like via] either [on-line] online or off-line.

2. Description of the Related Art

[0002] Conventionally, a sales promotion [is known in which a] entails
10 awarding purchase points [is given] to a shopper (referred to as a user
hereinafter), [and will be] who accumulates[d] them, every time he/she buys
merchandise or a service. For example, airlines conduct mileage accumulation
programs [carry out] not only for their own airline services, but which also
include [other services in which the] points the user has earned through
15 restaurant use and hotel stays[ing is exchanged for mileage to be accumulated].
The user can redeem the [earned] mileage points earned for [an] air tickets and
[the like] other awards when he/she has reached a [earns] predetermined
number of miles. Though not as large in scale as the airline mileage programs
[service], [the] award point programs have [service has] been [made] used [of]
20 for the purchase of many items[,]. For example, points are awarded for the

purchase of [a] records, CDs, [or] music tapes, and similar items [the like], at each shop or [in its] affiliate[d one's] within a given network.

[0003] Recently, accompanied by [a] the rapid expansion of online shopping [utilizing] over the [WWW (World Wide Web) of the] Internet, [the] point services
5 have tended[s] to expand [as well]. Since [the] online shopping does not depend on location [where to operate], it can attract users who reside remotely from a shop's physical address[site,]. Namely, it [could] can attract anyone connected to the Internet. However, [there exists] it also presents a danger [where] that users who reside close[ly] to the [site] physical address may be
10 captured by competitors. Moreover, since [the] a user can compare the prices of merchandise at home, the shops must endeavor not only to win the price competition but also to secure returning users by providing value-added services. As a means therefor, the point service model needs to be restructured and used effectively [utilized].

15 [0004] However, since there are an incredibly large number of online shopping sites available and they can each develop [each] their own point service[ing], [the] users may have a hard time [in figuring out] determining which company and [which] point service [scheme] their purchase activities are linked to. For example, many users may experience a [case] situation where, though
20 a purchase of merchandise at one shop is linked to a discount at another shop[s], the user[s are] is not aware of it and [they] will miss out on the discounted product [service then]. Moreover, even though the user has saved

up a certain level of eligible points, he/she [could] may not understand [as to] which prize [is to] the points can be [exchanged] redeemed for [the points,]. [so that he/she might have used] This may lead a user to redeem the points [in an] incompletely [and] or in an unwise manner [to his/her regret].

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0005] The present invention has been [made] developed in [view] light of the foregoing drawbacks, and an object thereof is to provide a support technique so that users can make the most effective use of [the] their purchase points.

[0006] An aspect of the present invention relates to an apparatus that
10 manages purchase points [managing apparatus]. The apparatus includes a point table, a merchandise table, and an exchange table. The point table records, per user, [a] the total point value [of points which a] each user has earned[s] by purchasing merchandise. The merchandise table [which] describes the relationship between the merchandise items for sale and [a] the
15 points earned [as a result of] for the purchase [thereof] of each item. The exchange table [which] describes the relationship between the points earned and [a] the prize offered for a given number of points [to the user according to the point earned]. Usually, a prize will be [given by] awarded in exchange[ing] for the user's [earned] points [for it]. The apparatus further includes a
20 merchandise recommending unit, which presents [to] the user with [a] candidate

merchandise [candidate to] that may be purchased [so as] to [acquire] earn a predetermined prize.

[0007] By implementing this structure, when the user purchases merchandise, the points corresponding to the [merchandise is] item are determined [based on] using the merchandise table. [so as to] These points will be recorded in the point table. If the user already has some points, [total points of the already earned points and] the points earned in this [time] transaction will be added to those already earned and the total will be recorded. Thereafter, the exchange table will be [referred to] referenced at some [stage] interval, and a prize [exchangeable for] equal to the level of the user's [earned] point[s] total will be determined. [However, there are] In many cases however, [where a rank of] the [exchangeable] prize can be upgraded [if a few more points are added] by purchasing a bit more and thus earning a few more points. [A] The preferred embodiment [according to] of the present invention [pays attention to] recognizes this point[,], [so that] The merchandise recommending unit detects a [possible] prize that can be earned [obtainable] with [certain] an additional purchase and then presents [a candidate] an appropriate selection of candidate merchandise [to be purchased]. Thus, the user can [realize an] make optimum [usage] use of the points while purchasing [necessary] merchandise that he/she needs.

[0008] Information on said candidate merchandise may be stored in [a] the candidate table. In that case, the candidate table may also store [, in addition to

said candidate table,] information on [a plurality of merchandise] combinations
of candidate[s] merchandise [in combination to] which may be purchased [by
which] to acquire the predetermined prize. In order to obtain additional points
(shortage points) to reach the total points (target points) [necessary] needed to
5 [for] acquireing a higher-ranked prize, the user [needs to] must purchase
merchandise. [Then] Therefore, it will be easier for the user to [make a plan]
upgrade if the shortage points can be [filled in] acquired by purchasing [a
plurality] multiple items of merchandise in combination. [Thus, such candidates
are shown by combination of the merchandise.]

10 **[0009]** The merchandise recommending unit may combine the merchandise
to be purchased [and a purchasing] with the timing [thereof] of that purchase by
referring to the merchandise table [so as] to define a purchasing model[,]. [and
present] The purchasing model may then be presented to the user. [A] The
point system usually sets a validity date for the points earned during a certain
15 period. Thus, [for example,] if a condition such as [in] “purchase until November
this year” is indicated to the user, the user does not need[s not] to worry [so
much] about the validity date of the points earned [points].

[0010] The purchase point managing apparatus may further include a user
data table which stores individual data [on the] regarding the users, wherein
20 said merchandise recommending unit may present [to the] a user with a suitable
purchasing model [suitable for the user] by [extracting] selecting the purchasing
model from the candidate table based on the individual's data. For example,

wine would be recommended to [for the] a user who is [found] determined to be a wine lover based on [the] a questionnaire or the user's purchasing[e] history [in the past, there is a way in which wine would be recommended to this particular user].

- 5 **[0011]** The apparatus may further include a point transfer unit. The point transfer unit transfers points [in whole or in part] earned by [the] a user, in whole or in part, to another user[,]. [or] The point transfer unit also transfers the points earned by a single user [between points earned] under other point managing systems [and] to those earned in the purchase point managing apparatus and
- 10 vice-versa. [The] "Point managing system" means a [system in which the] point system that is managed and operated by [a certain] one shop independently[,]
or in cooperation with [a plurality of] multiple other shops. The point transfer unit may present the user with, in a [user] selectable manner, [to the user] other point managing systems that permit a bi-directional exchange of points [to and
- 15 from which a point is transferable].

- [0012]** The apparatus may further include a history notifying unit. The history notifying unit manages a [purchase history of the] user's [in the] past purchase history and classifies merchandise purchased by the user based on [a] predetermined criteria[on] so that it may [as to] be presented to the user. The
- 20 merchandise is classified [classifying procedure is performed] based on criteria used in the household accounts, such as [counting] the number of items, a period such as "for the past 6 months", a [scheduled] user such as "for myself",

“for family members” [and] or “for the company”, and a purchase amount such as “5,000 yen or more”.

[0013] The apparatus may further include a prize presenting unit. The prize presenting unit presents the prize [exchanged] awarded in exchange for the user's points, [via] either [on-line] online or off-line. Prior to this presentation, the prize presenting unit indicates [in advance] a single prize or [a plurality of] combination of multiple prizes [in combination exchangeable for the points] that the points may be redeemed for. Suppose that a [the] user has 1,000 points. The user tries to [make out a] plan the best possible use of the points [by] so as not to waste[ing] any of them [within the 1000 points]. [Such a best possible combination is indicated by] The prize presenting unit[,] indicates the best possible combination so that the user can decide [make up his/her mind easily and] quickly and easily.

[0014] Another aspect of the present invention relates to a method of managing [a] purchase points. The method includes: recording [per user a] the total [value of] point[s] value [which a user] earned[s] by purchasing merchandise for each user; selecting [a] candidate merchandise [candidate which is] to recommended [to] for purchase[d] in order for a user to acquire a predetermined prize, by comparing the total value of the points with the relationship between the merchandise, [a] the points earned [as a result of] for purchase of the merchandise, and [a] the prize offered to the user according to the points earned[, to the total value of points]; and presenting the selected

candidate merchandise [candidate selected] to the user. Moreover, the user may specify [his/her desired] the prize he/she desires as the predetermined prize, in which case the candidate[s of] merchandise necessary for [filling in] obtaining the shortage points to [obtain] earn the prize is indicated.

- 5 **[0015]** Moreover, any arbitrary combination of the above-mentioned structural components in the present invention is still effective as an embodiment of the present invention when applied as an apparatus, a method, a system, a recording medium, [and so forth] or any other mode of practice.

- [0016]** Moreover, this summary of the invention does not necessarily describe
10 all [necessarily] necessary features, so that the invention may also be sub-combination of [these] the features described [features].

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- [0017]** Fig. 1 shows [an] the overall structure of [a] the network system 10 including [a] the purchase point managing apparatus 24 according to an
15 embodiment of the present invention.

[0018] Fig. 2 shows [an] the internal structure of [a] the purchase point managing apparatus 24.

[0019] Fig. 3 shows [an] the internal structure of [a] the merchandise table T2.

[0020] Fig. 4 shows [an] the internal structure of [an] the exchange table T5.

[0021] Fig. 5 shows [an] the internal structure of [a] the point table T4.

[0022] Fig. 6 shows [an] the internal structure of [a] the purchase history table T1.

5 **[0023]** Fig. 7 shows [an] the internal structure of [a] the user data table T3.

[0024] Fig. 8 shows [an] the internal structure of [a] the candidate table T6.

[0025] Fig. 9 is an example of [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when the user accesses an on-line shopping page within the purchase point managing site 16.

10 **[0026]** Fig. 10 is [a] the screen 120 displayed on [a] the user terminal 12 when a user clicks on [a] the “your points” button 128.

[0027] Fig. 11 is [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when [a] the user “Taro” clicks on [a] the “hint for purchase” button 146.

[0028] Fig. 12 is [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when
15 the user clicks on the “point transfer” button 148 on the screen 120 shown in Fig. 10.

[0029] Fig. 13 is [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when the user clicks on [a] the link 184.

[0030] Fig. 14 is [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when the user clicks on the housekeeping account book button 150 shown in Fig. 10.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0031] The invention will now be described based on the preferred embodiments, which [do] are not intend to limit the scope of the present invention, but serve to exemplify [the invention] it. Not all of the features and [the] combinations thereof described in the embodiment are [not] necessarily
10 essential to the invention.

[0032] Fig. 1 shows [an] the overall structure of [a] the network system 10, including [a] the purchase point managing apparatus 24, according to an embodiment of the present invention. Here, a user terminal 12 and [a] the purchase point managing site 16 are connected via the Internet 14. The user
15 terminal 12 [includes] may be a personal computer (PC), a [personal digital assistant] Personal Digital Assistant (PDA), a mobile phone [which can be connected to the] with Internet 14 access, [and] or any other [arbitrary] appropriate hardware device. The purchase point managing site 16 is a [usual] typical site, but it may also function as an Internet Service Provider (ISP) for the
20 user terminal 12. Moreover, [in general,] it may generally serve as a portal site for sorting and managing information [so as to meet] for the users' convenience

[of users]. [In what is to follow,] Throughout, the [user utilizes the] purchase point managing site 16 is configured as a portal site [having] possessing an on-line shopping capability.

[0033] The purchase point managing site 16 includes a WWW server 20
5 [which] that exchanges information with the Internet 14 via a router 18, a mail server 22, a DNS server (not shown) and [so forth] other functionality as required. [Though a] Although the purchase point managing apparatus 24 is provided inside of the WWW server 20, the apparatus 24 may also be provided as an independent server and can be [realized] implemented [by other] in
10 various other modes.

[0034] Fig. 2 shows [an] the internal structure of the purchase point managing apparatus 24. In terms of hardware components, the structure can be [realized] implemented [by] using a CPU, [a] memory, and other large-scale integration (LSI) functions of the WWW server 20, while in terms of software it can be
15 [realized] implemented using [by] a program[,] loaded into the memory of the WWW server 20[,] that is capable of performing purchase point related functions[, or the like]. However, Fig. 2 is a functional block description [realized] comprised of a combination of [by those] hardware and software components [in combination]. Thus, [it is to be understood by] those skilled in
20 the art should understand that the functional block description can be implemented using [is realizable by] hardware alone, software alone, [or those] both in combination, or through various other [various modes] means.

[0035] Each processing unit of the purchase point managing apparatus 24 communicates with the user terminal 12 via [a] the communication unit 30. [A] The memory unit 44 includes a purchase history table T1, a merchandise table T2, a user data table T3, a point table T4, an exchange table T5 and a candidate table T6. The details of each table [will be] are described later, [and the] but a brief description [therefor] of each is given here. The purchase history table T1 records, per user, the merchandise purchased at the purchase point managing site 16. The merchandise table T2 stores data on the merchandise and [a] the points [given] awarded for the purchase of each item [when the merchandise is purchased]. The user data table T3 records individual data on each user[’s individual data]. The point table T4 records, [per user,] the [total] number of points [the] each user has earned. The exchange table T5 shows [a] the relationship between the [earned] points earned and [a] the prizes those points can be redeemed for [exchangeable therefor]. The candidate table T6 stores data on candidate[s of] merchandise [which is possible] that can be purchased to [fill in] earn the points [short of in order to win a prize whose level is higher by one rank] required to reach the next highest prize level.

[0036] The merchandise display unit 34 reads [out] merchandise data from the merchandise table T2[,] and displays [the read-out merchandise data] it on [a screen of] the user terminal’s 12 screen. [A] The purchase receiving unit 32 receives [from] the users’ [the] merchandise purchases [of merchandise through the] made while shopping on-line [shopping]. When the user decides to make a

purchase [certain merchandise], the purchase receiving unit 32 refers to the merchandise table T2 and [specifies a] determines the point value to be [given] awarded to the user[.]. [so that the total values of the points earned by] The user's point total is then updated [at] in the point table T4. Moreover, the

5 purchase receiving unit 32 adds said merchandise to [a] the user's purchase history [of the user at] in the purchase history table T1

[0037] [A] The merchandise recommending unit 36 presents [a] candidate [of] merchandise [to a user] when a user [he/she] inquires about [status of] his/her point status. When the candidate merchandise is purchased, the user's point

10 total increases and the user is eligible to receive the [acquires a] prize at the next award level [whose rank is higher by one]. Thus, the inquiring user's current point total [of the user who inquired] is read out of the point table T4, and [a target] the number of points required [by which] to reach [at the one-rank higher] the next highest prize level, the target point value, is specified from the

15 exchange table T5. Next, the current point total is subtracted from the target point value [so as] to calculate [a point] the number of shortage points [short of]. Thereafter, merchandise [by which to compensate for the] that can be purchased to earn the required number of shortage points is selected from the candidate table T6 [so as to be presented] for presentation to the user. Then,

20 the user data table T3 is [referred to] referenced in order to introduce merchandise [which] that the user most [probably] likely prefers.

[0038] [A] The point transfer unit 38 has two functions. The first [function] relates to [a] the process[ing in] by which [a] one user exchanges his/her points with other users [who utilize] of the purchase point managing site 16. The second [function] relates to [a] the process[ing in] by which [a] points earned by the user at other point systems, [for example, at] other on-line or off-line shopping sites for example, [is] are added [up] to the points earned at the purchase point managing site 16, or[, conversely,] the points earned at the site 16 [is] are transferred to [somewhere else] another point system. [When the point is transferred,] The point table T4 is updated when the points [is] are transferred. [In a case where a special approval between users is required for the transfer,] The user data table T3 is [referred to] referenced if special approval by the users is required for the transfer.

[0039] When [the] a user requests [an exchange of the] redemption of his/her points for a prize, [a] the prize presenting unit 40 specifies [a] the number of points to be exchanged [by using] according to the exchange table T5[,]. [so that] The point table T4 is then updated by subtracting the specified number of points from the user's point total. [Arrangement for and delivery of] Final arrangements for the prize and its delivery may be [processed] completed by a back end process.

[0040] When the user inquires about his/her own purchase history, [a] the history notifying unit 42 refers to the purchase history table T1 and classifies the

merchandise [purchased by] the user has purchased in the past according to [a] predetermined criteria[on] so [as to] that it may be presented to the user.

[0041] Fig. 3 shows [an] the internal structure of the merchandise table T2. The merchandise table T2 includes a merchandise column 60, a merchandise number column 62, a marked price column 64, a point column 66, and a details column 68. For example, a television is [the merchandise in question;] described [are] using "21-1234" as the merchandise number, "62000 yen" as the marked price, "62" as the number of points [given to] awarded for the purchase thereof, and by listing the URL "www.tv.com" as [a] the page [showing the] providing detailed information [of] on the merchandise. In this example, one point is awarded for every [corresponds to] 1000 yen of marked price ([a] fractions are [being] raised to the next whole number). [The] Merchandise is not limited to goods, [but] and may also include [a] trips such as an "eight-day cruise[ing] in the Aegean Sea" and other services. When the user accesses a page for on-line shopping, the merchandise display unit 34 reads [out] data from the merchandise table T2 and also displays [also] an image (not shown) if necessary.

[0042] Fig. 4 shows [an] the internal structure of the exchange table T5. The exchange table T5 includes a point column 72 and a [merchandise] prize column 74, and describes [therein that, for example, the points earned are exchangeable] the number of points that must be redeemed, for example 100, to receive a specific prize, such as "a portable camera[,] or a radio with an

alarm clock[, etc.]” [when the earned points accumulate to 100 points]. Here, [a] the exchange value of a single point is [exchanged for and worth about] approximately 50 yen. Thus, the user gets 50 yen back [against a purchase of] on each 1,000 yen purchased, [and its] representing a rate [is] of 5%.

- 5 **[0043]** Fig. 5 shows [an] the internal structure of the point table T4. The point table T4 includes a user column 78 and a total point column 80. For example, the [points earned by] users “Hana” and “Taro” [are] have earned “65” [points] and “2,922” points[,] respectively.

- [0044]** Fig. 6 shows [an] the internal structure of the purchase history
10 table T1. The purchase history table T1 includes a user column 84 and a [purchased-]merchandise purchased column 86. For example, user “Hana” has previously purchased “a thermos with water purifier” [is described therein as the merchandise purchased in the past].

- [0045]** Fig. 7 shows [an] the internal structure of the user data table T3. The
15 user data table T3 includes a user column 90, a gender column 92, an age column 94, an occupation column 96, and a hobby column 98. For example, [as] the individual data stored to describe [for a] user “Taro”[,] is [described are] “male” [as] for gender, “52” [years old] as] for age, “corporate president” [as] for occupation, and “wine, [and] traveling” [as] for hobby[, etc]. [These data are
20 utilized] This information is used when the system recommends[ing] candidate[s for] merchandise.

[0046] Fig. 8 shows [an] the internal structure of the candidate table T6. The candidate table T6 includes a point column 100 and a candidate merchandise column 102. The candidate merchandise column 102 includes a single item column 104, a two-item column 106, and three- or more-item column 108. The

5 point column 100 indicates the number of shortage points[,] and the candidate merchandise column 102 indicates [a candidate of] the merchandise options by which [to cover] the shortage points can be earned. For example, "a desk for PC" is a candidate for a user who wishes to acquire an additional 10 points[, "a desk for PC" is a candidate by which the 10 points will be covered]. "High grade

10 Soba/Udon" are the candidates if the user wishes to [cover] earn the shortage points by purchasing two items[, "high grade Soba/Udon" are the candidates]. If the user wishes to cover 80 shortage points [is 80 and is to be covered] by purchasing a single item, the candidate merchandise includes a "3-day trip in Hong Kong"[,] and a "leather coat" [and so forth are the candidates]. If the user

15 wishes to cover the 80 shortage points by purchasing two items, he/she can select one item from [A] column A ("Swiss watch, MD player, etc.[...]") in the two-item column 106 and another item from [B] column B ("digital camera, bicycle, etc.[...]"). If the user wishes to cover the 80 shortage points by purchasing three or more items, he/she can [apply for] choose from items

20 including a 6-month[s-6-times series of] "European tea cup" of the month subscription or a 12-month[s- 12-times series of] subscription for "specially selected wooden toys".

[0047] Fig. 9 is an example of [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when the user accesses an on-line shopping page within the purchase point managing site 16. Here[,] a “handling merchandise list” is displayed, organized into [where] categories [of] such as clothes 122, furniture 124, foodstuff 126, and others [are] (not shown). Each category is [broken into parts] divided according to merchandise levels. For example, items such as “sweaters” and “shirts” are listed in the clothes category [of the clothes]. The user accesses a page showing the merchandise list by selecting [an] the item of his/her choice. [A] The “your points” button 128 is provided in the [right-
10 below] lower right corner [position] of the screen 120.

[0048] Fig. 10 is [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when the user clicks [on] the “your points” button 128. “Taro” is displayed in [a] the user name [column] field 140, and “2,922” is displayed [on a] in the points-earned-so-far [column] field 142. Prizes [which] that can be [exchanged for]
15 claimed by redeeming [the value of the earned] some or all of the points [or less] already earned are displayed in the order [where each prize differs from another by 100 points] of their point value, in increments of 100, in [a] the prize column 144. The prize column 144 is generated [from] using the exchange table T5. [In the right side of the screen 120, displayed are a] The “hint for
20 purchase” button 146, [a] “point transfer” button 148, and [a] “housekeeping account book” button 150 are displayed along the right side of the screen 120.

[0049] Fig. 11 is [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when the user "Taro" clicks on the "hint for purchase" button 146. The system displays[ed] a statement in [a] the status explanation [column] field 160 [is a statement] indicating that deluxe Italian [deluxe] furniture or other prizes can be obtained if the user saves an additional 78 points to reach the 3,000 point[s] level.

[0050] [In a merchandise recommending column 162, there is displayed a] Candidate [of the] merchandise [which is] recommended [to] for purchase in order to acquire the 78 points is displayed in the merchandise recommending column 162. The merchandise recommending unit 36 selected [these] the candidate[s] merchandise from the candidate table T6 by referring to the [hobby of the] user ["Taro's"] hobby information ("wine, traveling")[, and]. A "3-day trip in Hong Kong" (whose last effective date of purchase is December[,] 2001) is listed in [a] the first recommendation [column] field 164. The term of validity for the [earned] points already earned and [a] the time limit [of] for merchandise planning are taken into consideration. [In a] The second recommendation [column] field 166, lists "world exclusive wine (12 months)" [is listed] and specifies its starting date (October[,] 2001[0]) [is specified]. "Details" buttons are provided for [In each of] the first and second recommendation [buttons] fields 164 and 166, [respective "details" buttons are provided,] which [will] facilitate the user's decision making. A "return" button 170 is provided in the [right-below] bottom right corner of the screen 120, [a "return" button 170 is

provided so that a) allowing the user [can] to return to [a state] the screen shown in Fig. 10 [by clicking on this “return” button 170].

[0051] Fig. 12 is [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when the user clicks on the “point transfer” button 148 on the screen 120 shown in Fig. 10. Here, “2,922” is displayed in [a] the transferable points [column] field 180, as points which the user “Taro” can transfer to other people. This value may be either the user’s current points or [may be] a predetermined [upper limit] maximum value. [Below the transferable point column 180, there is provided a] The transfer specifying [column] field 182 is provided below the transferable point field 180. [where a] The user name[,] to whom the points are to be given[,], and [its] the number of points to be transferred [can be inputted] are entered in the transfer specifying field. [Here, described is that] In this case, the user “Taro” wishes to give “2,000” points to the user “Hana”. When [a] the “send” button is clicked, the point table T4 is updated to complete the transfer [of the points].

[0052] [The user] “Taro” has saved up a relatively large [amount] number of points. [For example,] Instead of sending his daughter, [who is] the user “Hana”, a present for her birthday, graduation, or [the like] other occasion, [the user] “Taro” can transfer [the 2000] points to her so that she [can] may buy things [worth up to 100,000 yen] at her discretion. A 2,000 point transfer will allow “Hana” to buy things worth up to 100,000 yen. Moreover, for a user who has grandchildren, for example, the user has [an] the option to purchase the

- “specially selected wooden toy” and specify the grandchildren’s address as the delivery address [for the “toy” to be delivered,] so that [a] the toy or other [things] merchandise can be delivered to the grandchildren every month. [and can] Additionally, the user will also earn points on this purchase. [Moreover]
- 5 Finally, [such] the [earned] points earned in this manner [can] may be transferred to the grandchildren or their parents. This service model is suited to [servicing scheme is suitable for those users of old age] older users who have sufficient time and money to buy and send presents, but [would] are not able to go out and shop [to buy and send presents or the like].
- 10 **[0053]** Below the transfer specifying [column] field 182, there is [provided] a [region] link to a page where[, instead of transferring the points to others,] the user may transfer the points [the user himself/herself] he/she has earned [are added to points earned] at other on-line shops[, and moreover there is provided therein a link 184 for a user wishing to have such the service].
- 15 **[0054]** Fig. 13 is [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when the user clicks on the link 184. On this screen, “AAA online mart”, “BBB mileage” and [so forth] “CCC Record” are displayed as [contents of a] entries in the transferable affiliation list 190[,] and the user can select [a desirable] the desired point managing system from those listed. After selecting one [from] of
- 20 the systems from the transferable affiliation list 190, the user must fill[s] out [a] one of the transfer point [column] fields 192 [in] on the right side of the screen 120. In [the] this case [of this user,] up to 2,922 points [are transferable,]

can be transferred, so [that an arbitrary] any value [equal to or less than] up to 2,922 points [can] may be entered. After entering the value, the point table T4 is updated by clicking on [a] the “decide” button 194[,] and the points transfer [of the points] is complete[d]. [Moreover,] Conditions [as to an] such as the exchange rate [of the points transferable] between [a user and his/her] affiliated online shops and whether [or not] the transfer shall be permitted in an interactive manner[, and other conditions] may be determined between [both] the [parties] systems involved as a separate issue. However, [it will not be difficult to] incorporating[e] such [the] conditions into the system will not be difficult.

[0055] Fig. 14 is [a] the screen 120 displayed on the user terminal 12 when the user clicks on the housekeeping account book button 150 shown in Fig. 10. [There is provided] A period [column] field 200 is provided for specifying [how past it goes back into] the period of history to display. [In] Standard intervals may be provided in the case of a pull-down menu [mode, for example], such as “this month only”, “for the last three months”, “for the last half a year”, and “for the last [one] year” [or the like may be specified]. In Fig. 14[,] for example, “1 year” (for the last [one] year) is displayed [while a] and the usage [content of the user] is classified and displayed [by] in a clothing items [column] field 202, a food [column] field 204, an entertainment [column] field 206, and so forth. [For example, a] Here the total usage amount of “28,600 yen” for clothing is recorded in the clothing items field 202.[,] The merchandise purchased, [merchandise] consisting of a “cashmere sweater” [item,] and two “ties” [items],

[and] the subtotal amounts [thereof] for the items, and the purchase period are also recorded in the clothing items [column] field 202. Similarly detailed contents [of items] for categories other than clothing [items] are also [recorded] displayed, and "101,400 yen" is [recorded] reported in [a] the total amount

5 [column] field 208 [in the end] at the bottom of the page. [Thus,] The user can therefor utilize this screen 120 as an online housekeeping account book.

[0056] The present invention has been described [based on the] using exemplary embodiments [which are only exemplary]. [It is understood by] Those skilled in the art understand that there are [exist other] various

10 modifications to each component and [the] combination of [each] processes[ing] described, and that such modifications are encompassed by the scope of the present invention. Examples of such [the] modifications include the following.

[0057] Though the relationship between the [earned points and the] prizes and the points earned are indicated in Fig. 10, it is desirable [that] to include

15 various valuation modes [be also indicated], such as [a case] where the earned points [are] may be used for a single prize or for a combination of two or more prizes [in combination]. [Such a] This type of functionality can be incorporated into the prize presenting unit 40[,]. [and] The prize presenting unit 40 may suggest [the] a combination of [the] prizes before [the prize presenting unit 40] it

20 sets the [specifies a] prize for which the user wishes to exchange his/her earned points. When [so doing] suggesting a combination, the prize presenting unit 40

may [suggest the combination according to] consider the individual user's data
[of the user].

[0058] [Though in Fig. 2 a] Although functions relating to the purchase of
merchandise, such as the merchandise display unit 34 and the merchandise
5 receiving unit 32, [is] are incorporated into the purchase point managing
apparatus 24 in Fig. 2, such functions do not need [not] to be implemented in
the purchase point managing apparatus 24. [and] The purchase point managing
apparatus 24 may specialize [only on] solely in the management of [the] points.
In that case, [sharing] the purchase point managing apparatus 24 can easily be
10 shared among [a plurality of] multiple point managing systems, [will be easily
realized, so that the mutual] making the transfer of points between the systems
[points] and the mutual utilization thereof [are realized smoothly] much easier.

[0059] According to the present embodiments, [the] a user's points earned
[by] through the purchase of merchandise can be [further] used effectively
15 [utilized], [which also contributes] helping to promote[ing] the purchase of
merchandise.

[0060] Although the present invention has been described by way of
exemplary embodiments, it should be understood that many changes and
substitutions may be made by those skilled in the art without departing from the
20 spirit and the scope of the present invention, which is defined by the appended
claims.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A purchase point managing apparatus, comprising:
 - a point table which records per user a total value of points which a user earns by purchasing merchandise;
 - a merchandise table which describes relationship between the merchandise and a point earned as a result of purchase thereof;
 - an exchange table which describes relationship between the point and a prize offered to the user according to the point earned; and
 - a merchandise recommending unit which presents to the user a merchandise candidate to be purchased so as to acquire a predetermined prize.
2. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 1, further comprising a candidate table which stores data on the merchandise candidate, wherein said candidate table stores, in addition to said data, data on a plurality of merchandise in combination which are suggested to be purchased to acquire the predetermined prize.
3. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 2, wherein said merchandise recommending unit combines the merchandise to be purchased and a purchasing timing thereof by referring to said merchandise table so as to define a purchasing model, and presents the purchasing model to the user.

4. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 3, further comprising a user data table which stores individual data on the user,

wherein said merchandise recommending unit presents to the user a purchasing model suitable for the user by extracting the purchasing model from said candidate table based on the individual data.

5. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 1, further comprising a first point transfer unit which transfers points in whole or in part earned by the user to another user.

6. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 2, further comprising a first point transfer unit which transfers points in whole or in part earned by the user to another user.

7. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 3, further comprising a first point transfer unit which transfers points in whole or in part earned by the user to another user.

8. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 4, further comprising a first point transfer unit which transfers points in whole or in part earned by the user to another user.

9. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 1, further comprising a second point transfer unit which transfers points earned by a single user between points earned under other point managing system and those earned in said purchase point managing apparatus.

10. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 2, further comprising a second point transfer unit which transfers points earned by a single user between points earned under other point managing system and those earned in said purchase point managing apparatus.

11. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 3, further comprising a second point transfer unit which transfers points earned by a single user between points earned under other point managing system and those earned in said purchase point managing apparatus.

12. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 4, further comprising a second point transfer unit which transfers points earned by a single user between points earned under other point managing system and those earned in said purchase point managing apparatus.

13. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 1, wherein said point table is updated whenever a point is transferred to or from other point managing system.

14. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 9, wherein said second point transfer unit presents, in a user selectable manner, to the user other point managing system to and from which a point is transferable.

15. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 1, further comprising a history notifying unit which manages a purchase history of the user in the past and classifies merchandise purchased by the user based on a predetermined criterion so as to be notified to the user.

16. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 1, further comprising a prize presenting unit which presents the prize exchanged for the points, via on-line or off-line,

wherein said prize presenting unit indicates in advance a single prize or a plurality of prizes in combination exchangeable for the points.

17. A purchase point managing apparatus as recited in Claim 1, wherein the apparatus is provided either in a world wide web (WWW) server or external thereto independently.

18. A method of managing a purchase point, comprising:
recording per user a total value of points which a user earns by
purchasing merchandise;

selecting a merchandise candidate which is recommended to purchased in order to acquire a predetermined prize, by comparing relationship between the merchandise, a point earned as a result of purchase of the merchandise, and a prize offered to the user according to the point earned, to the total value of points; and

presenting the merchandise candidate selected to the user.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISCLOSURE

A purchase point managing apparatus is [built] incorporated into an online shopping site[,] and [is communicated] communicates with [the] users via the Internet. The points [the] that users earn[ed] by purchasing merchandise are
5 recorded in a point table. A merchandise recommending unit selects and recommends [to the user the] candidate[s of] merchandise [to be] for purchase[d] to the user by calculating [a] the points [short of] the user needs in order to [acquire a] obtain the next highest prize [whose rank is higher than one]. The purchase point managing apparatus includes a point transfer unit [in]
10 by which [the] points are transferred between the users, and a history notifying unit [which] that offers [to the user a] the functionality of the housekeeping account book to the user.